

Kalhana & History: Historical Issues to His ‘Rajatarangini’

Jitendra Kumar,
M.A. (F) History,
University of Delhi

Abstract

It had been said by the colonial scholars and historians that India possessed no history by pointing out that the ancient India has a rich heritage of religious texts and literature, but it lacks historical works as comparison to the scholars of Greece and Rome of those times had systematically documented their period. It is only from the beginning of the medieval period that Muslim scholars started writing histories to document the triumph of Islam. But if we study the great literary works of Sanskrit literature in ancient India i.e. ‘itihas-puran tradition’, itivrtta, akhyayika, vansabali, carita, and chronicle of kings, then we find that they forms some types of historical sense. In this paper I will point out the ideas of historical sense in the Sanskrit literature in India with special reference to Kalhana’s ‘Rajatarangini’. I will mostly focus on the translation which had been carried out by a various historians through 16th, 17th, 18th 19th and 20th century, historical debates on the nature of Kalhana’s ‘Rajatarangini’ and its values, his themes and contents etc. There has been a lot of ongoing argument related to ‘Rajatarangini’ to define it as literary work or the historical work. My work will try to show it that it should be seen as the historical or the great literary texts written by a great man of Kashmir in 12th century AD.

The ‘Rajatarangini’ is a long narrative poem of eight thousand metrical verses of Sanskrit literature divided into eight cantons, recognized as a comprehensive and continuous history of the kings of Kashmir from mythical times to the date of its composition (AD1148-49) which covered approximately 3600 years. It is based on traditions, legends, written records, and inscriptions. It was written by Kalhana as a ‘Kavya’ and aiming at a synthesis of aesthetic historical truth.¹This narrative is composed during a period when dynastic revolutions and the emergence of new social classes threatened the established social and political order.²It is primarily concerned with the succession of kings and queens who ruled Kashmir during this period and highlights a rich narrative of social, political, and cultural history. The purposes of Kalhana to write this historical text were to connect the narratives of various dynasties which ruled over Kashmir from the earliest time to his own period.

Translation of ‘Rajatarangini’

¹ Warder, 1972, pp. 55-62.

² Zutshi, 2011, pp. 6.

The early 20th century produced the European Indologist and Indian nationalist translation work of the Kalhana's '*Rajatarangini*' in which the translation of M.A. Stein (1900) and R.S. Pandit (1935) are important. The practice of translation and readings of '*Rajatarangini*' in both Sanskrit and Persian literature had been continued through 12th to 20th century. In Persian literature it was first carried out by Mulla Ahmed, the court historian of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin (r. 1423–74). Abul Fazl noted in his *Ain-i-Akbari* that when Mughal emperor Akbar entered into Kashmir after conquering it in 1586, then he was offered a various works and '*Rajatarangini*' authored by Pandit Ratnagir, Padma Mehr, Kshemendra, and Kalhana and other Sanskrit and Persian writers. Haider Malik Chadurah, governor of Kashmir appointed by Jahangir, in his *Tarikh* noted that Mughal emperor Jahangir commissioned Muhammad Hussain to translate the '*Rajatarangini*', and then deputed him (Chadurah) to utilize it to investigate the lives of his own ancestors by composing a narrative of Kashmir's past. The texts of various '*Rajatarangini*' i.e. *Baharistan-i-Shahi* (1614), *Tarikh-i-Kashmir* (1618–21), *Waqiat-i-Kashmir* (1747), and *Tarikh-i-Hasan* (1885) have been survived through the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries in other histories of Kashmir.

The earliest European to record an encounter with '*Rajatarangini*' was the Frenchman François Bernier, who traveled through Mughal India, including Kashmir, in the seventeenth century and noted in his travelogue that he was engaged in translating "the histories of the ancient Kings of Kachemire" into French.³ In 1825, H. H. Wilson published it in the Asiatic Society's journal *Asiatic Researches*, in which he introduced the idea that Kalhana's '*Rajatarangini*' was perhaps "the only Sanskrit composition yet discovered, to which the title of History, can with any propriety be applied". The first complete English translation of Kalhana's text in prose form was carried out by J. C. Dutt in three volumes, published in 1879, 1887, and 1898. In this Dutt described '*Rajatarangini*' as "an account of a people who lived from the earliest period in a corner of India". His translation was an attempt to present '*Rajatarangini*' as a "sober history" that fit European standards of history writing.⁴ Whereas George Buhler indicted Kalhana's '*Rajatarangini*' that possessed legend and myth as rendering the chronology of a large part of the text "valueless" and its author suspect.⁵

The full version of English translation of '*Rajatarangini*' appeared in two volumes by M.A. Stein in 1900 which is the most widely read and cited translation and show '*Rajatarangini*' as the history because of its chronological narratives, sources and objectivity, but he refrained from describing it as history in his introduction and defined it as the 'medieval chronicle'.⁶ Stein's research attempted to establish Kashmir as a unique and separate region within the Indian Subcontinent and history produced by its historian are the history of Kashmir.

The Translation of '*Rajatarangini*' which came out in 1935 and presented the nationalist perspectives to highlight this texts of Sanskrit literature was done by R.S. Pandit who had personal and political motivations for translating it into English by criticizing M.A. Stein's translation of '*Rajatarangini*'. He described it as a historical '*kavya*' that highlighted the literary heritage of the Indian nation and its people. He regarded it as much as other Sanskrit classics which more historical truth and embodied more universal, even eternal truths. Pandit pointed out that Kalhana has formed history as "humanistic studies and toward art rather than towards

³ Zutshi, 2011, pp. 10.

⁴ Ibid, pp. 11 (Originally in Dutt, 1879, pp. ii-iii).

⁵ Pandit, 2004 (1935) pp. xv.

⁶ Zutshi, 2011, pp. 18.

economic life” and for him “history was not something to learn, but something to make people live and understand life”.⁷ He says that Kalhana’s work was inlaid with all eight sentiments-love, merriment, pathos, wrath, courage, terror, repulsion, and marvel which were designed “to teach the art of life”.⁸ He analyzed Kalhana’s work was not the narrative of Kashmir region but as the national narrative of Indian history.

The translation of Stein presented ‘*Rajatarangini*’ as a Sanskrit historical ‘*kavya*’, which drew a picture of Kashmir’s unique geographical and historical identity. While Pandit’s translation carried out specifically as a counterpoint to Stein’s and dismissed the value of ‘*Rajatarangini*’ as a regional Kashmiri historical text, offering it instead to a national audience as a Sanskrit text that embodied India’s literary heritage and the essential and best qualities of the Indian nation.

Historian’s views on ‘*Rajatarangini*’

R.C. Mazumdar, in his ‘Ideas of History in Sanskrit Literature’, has pointed out the quantity of historical sense in the scholars of Sanskrit literature. For him, there were the traditions to collect the events and write them which can be seen in ‘*itihas-puran*’ tradition and ‘chronicles of kings’ which were not more developed to arrange it systematically, but their purposes and contents shows them historical. He said that the historical sense in Sanskrit literature is widely found in the Kashmir Chronicle which was written by Kalhana. For him, “Kalhana’s ‘*Rajatarangini*’ shows high-water mark of historical knowledge reached by the ancient Hindu.”⁹ But he points out some characters of Kalhana which did not fit him historical is the use of contents in his early cantons such as the presence of mythical or legendary kings, “a blind faith in the Epics and Puranas,” a belief in witchcraft and magic, explanation of events as due to the influence of fate “rather than to any rational cause,” a general didactic tendency inspired by Hindu views of karma, and “mere display of poetical and rhetorical skill.”¹⁰ Nevertheless on the basis of the later parts of cantons Mazumdar points out that Kalhana has a supreme merit of possessing a critical mind and spirit of skepticism which is the first virtues of a historian and he questioned the veracity of past historians, and examined their statements in the light of available evidence culled from the various sources.¹¹

A.L. Basham has roughly divided it into three sections, first; chapters i-iii, in which Kalhan appears to have based his statements almost entirely on traditions, second; iv-vi, covering the Karkota and Utpala Dynasties, in which the chronology are being made or nearly events are described and lastly; vii-viii, covering the two Lohara Dynasties, in which Kalhan used the eye witness accounts and personal knowledge towards society. For him, the way in which Kalhana used the sources, the purposes he chose to write and his understanding of historians work, are historical which qualifies Kalhana as the historian and Basham concludes that “Kalhana’s attitude to history would have been shared by most educated men in medieval Hindu India.”¹²

Romila Thapar has described Kalhana’s ‘*Rajatarangini*’ as the narrative ‘*kavya*’ which deals with the history of Kashmir from the earliest time to his own time. But following

⁷ Dutt, 1879, pp. xxx-xxxi.

⁸ Ibid, pp. xxi.

⁹ Mazumdar, 1961, pp. 25.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 22-24.

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 21.

¹² Basham, 1961, pp. 57-65.

Mazumdar and Basham she has distinguished the early cantons of '*Rajatarangini*' in which supernatural causes are given important and later parts where Kalhana's historical thinking are presented. Historical events are now discussed from many points of views. She then says "Kalhan was not a man with a closed mind, and this after all, is an essential qualification for a good historian."¹³

But the writers of 'Textures of Time' Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam highlight Kalhana's '*Rajatarangini*' in different manner and saw it as the 'weak historiography' by defining it as the 'hyper-real' and distinguished it from a historical novel through pointing out that "realism by itself is no guarantee of historicity." They also charged it that it displays little understanding of causality.¹⁴ But when they talk about the south Indian text *Karanam*, then did not attention about the concept of hyper-real in that texts.

Chitrlekha Zutshi, in her "Translating the Past", has recently talked about the translation of Stein (1900) and Pandit (1935) in which Kalhana's '*Rajatarangini*' has been defined as the regional or vernacular and at the same time as the national and universal by other authors.¹⁵ She has tried to link the statement as to why Stein and Pandit gave their opinion to identify the nature and concept of '*Rajatarangini*' which create a different on this work of Sanskrit literature.

Another important argument on Kalhana's '*Rajatarangini*' which shows a very different opinion to place it into a historical category is recently given by Shonaleeka Kaul. She has pointed out that Kalhana's '*Rajatarangini*' is not a simple texts, but as composite as the "*kavya*" in form and spirit, but draw heavily in content, slant, and ever form on several other textual traditions.¹⁶ For her, '*Rajatarangini*' gives a philosophical corrective for the understanding of Kashmir. As pointed out by Kaul, "Kalhana does not merely recount the past of a regional kingdom; at multiple levels, he constructs a space called Kashmir which is a politico-geographical space on the ground, but also an ideological space open to the author to organize around moral principles that bring the past and present into a complementary relationship."¹⁷

Sources & Chronology of '*Rajatarangini*'

Kalhana's ideas to arrange works with the systemic sources defined his works as the historical. The value of historical impartiality can easily be traced in his works. He narrated the affairs of Kashmir without any intention, but just for the knowledge of Kashmir to their people. He himself says about the poet which make them great, "worthy of praise whose word, like that of a judge, keeps free from love or hatred in relating the facts of the past."¹⁸ The credit which has been given to Kalhana's work was for his materials which he had used in his work. He has used eleven works of former scholars in which Nilmatpuran, Kshemendra's 'List of Kings', and chronicles of Padmamihira and Chavillakar etc. He said that he had taken eight royal names beginning with Lawa from Padmamihira's work. Kshemendra's works was famous in ancient India, but due to its nature, Kalhana acknowledges it to be "the work of a poet", but charges it with showing mistakes in every single part, "due to a certain want of care."¹⁹ Apart from literary

¹³ Thapar, 1983, pp. 52-62.

¹⁴ Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam, 2001, pp. 254-60.

¹⁵ Zutshi, 2001, pp. 5-27. (Also see Kaul, 2013, pp. 209)

¹⁶ Kaul, 2013, pp. 209.

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 222.

¹⁸ Stein, 1900, pp. 24.

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 25.

works Kalhana also used the inscription regarding the consecration of temples and grants by former kings which were at the laudatory inscriptions (*prasasti*) and at written texts. His antiquarian interests whom he used in his texts as the sources made his works prosperous. He also referred coins, monuments and buildings to find the details. Another most important source which he used in the later cantons of his texts is the personal knowledge and contemporary eye witness. It is highly probable that his accurate and vivid account of political affairs of Kashmir is based on the communication of his father, who was the royal chief of the king Harsh of Kashmir.²⁰ Thus, Kalhana not only made a thorough study of all previous writers on the history of Kashmir, but also constructed the original sources.²¹

The chronology of the '*Rajatarangini*' distinguished its cantons into two parts; the first from chapter i-iii in which the chronology had not been mentioned in the systematic way and persons and events which figures mentioned in them, can but rarely be traced in other sources, while the second parts from iv-viii which extends from the beginning of Karkota dynasty to his own time, are easily be traced in the Indian and foreign accounts.²² His chapter from i-iii talks about the chronology of Gonanda I who, according to Kalhana, was in Kali year 653 and accession of Gonanda III about 1919 Kali year or 1182 BC.²³ Kalhan has also described this Kali year 653 as the period when Yudhishtir, elder brother of Pandavs were presented and Kali Year 1919 or 1182 BC as the age of Asoka of Mauryan Empire. But the current archaeological evidence tells the age of Asoka in the 3rd century BC, as he was a great patron of Buddhism. Even Buddhist writings also talks about his reign and it is well known that Buddhism started by Lord Buddha in 6th century BC. That is why some scholars distinguished early parts of '*Rajatarangini*' from its later parts because of its arrangement of the chronology.

He said that the name of 52 kings were left by the earlier writers between Gonanda I and Gonanda III, so he tried to arrange those names. He in his chapter iii gives the date of Vikramaditya, who started Saka era in 78 AD, about 4th century BC. If we follow the dates given by Kalhana, then the age of Vikramaditya will be 500 year back.²⁴ Kalhana started giving dates in the systematic manner from Laukika year 3889 which began on 7th March, 813 AD to the Laukika year 4225 i.e. 1149-50AD which are available in his book v-viii and can be traced by other sources.²⁵

Historical Sense in Kalhana

Kalhana, who wrote '*Rajatarangini*', was the son of Lord Champak who was a chief official of king Harsh (A.D. 1089-1101). His works highlights that he was touched with the royal families of Kashmir and whatever he wrote in his later chapters were based on the eye witness accounts. His father was more touched with the political affairs of Kashmir who must have guided Kalhana to provide details of Kashmir.²⁶ Kanak was his uncle who had also a great

²⁰ Stein, 1900, pp. 27.

²¹ Mazumdar, 1961, pp. 21.

²² Stein, 1900, pp. 56.

²³ Ibid, pp. 56-66.

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 66.

²⁵ Ibid, pp. 67-68.

²⁶ Ibid, pp. 6-7.

connection with the royal families. It is noted that Kalhana was Brahmin by caste and Tantrik worship was known to him, but he also kept interest in the Buddhism.²⁷

His literary training helped him to write this kind of texts which highlight a long history of Kashmir. He was well-known to Indian rhetoric, Alamkarasastra and Sanskrit grammatical lore. He studied *vansavali*, epics, Vikramankdevcarita, Harsacarita and Mankha's Srikanthacarita.²⁸ Mankha was a well-known poet of Kalhan's times in Kashmir who arranged an Alankar Sabha and listed most of the participants in that Sabha. His Srikanthacarita presented a person known as Kalyan, who must be Kalhana.²⁹ The main aspects which make Kalhana's work as the historical is the concept of his task what he understand to write in great details about Kashmir from ancient time. His ideas of work as the '*kavi*' and to mention the sources in his works distinguished him from the early writers of the chronicles. Kalhana described his work which purposes were "to give a connected account where the narrative of past events has become fragmentary in many respects."³⁰ The rule of *Alankarasastra* and didactic features used by him brought his work to be truth and proved to be historical.³¹

But super-natural things and mistakes in chronology were done by Kalhana in the earlier chapters of the '*Rajatarangini*' which covered up to 8th century. The critiques of his texts mark a question regarded the nature of '*Rajatarangini*' as to define it as the historical or literary works. But again other styles, purposes and contents of his work can prove his work as the historical one. The honesty and impartiality are the great aspects which he used in his work. He does not hide the errors and weaknesses of the king under whom he wrote. As pointed out by him Banbhat and Bilhana, who were too treats of historical facts, yet their "heroes are painted all white and their enemies all black".³² Certainly he praises some of the king's enemies for their courage. The conventions of Sanskrit literature required a happy ending, and Kalhana was first and foremost a poet who could have concluded his work with a description of tyranny and oppression without any tasteful events.³³ Another important elements what Kalhana had used in his chronicle was the rhetorical ornaments in which metaphors, similes, puns, and the endless varieties of poetic figures which are the tests of the *Kavi* skills.³⁴

He was aware of the functions of historical writings and declares that he wrote his chronicle for various purposes i.e. to establish the chronology in true manner, to write readable narrative of past, and in the last he mentioned of his philosophy of history.³⁵ Kalhana's ideas on the writing of history were directly influenced by two main streams of the Indian traditions which were concerned with recording the past: the Brahmanical and the Buddhist. There is some evidence on this period of the history of Kashmir available in the Annals of the Tang Dynasty of China. If communication with China was so close at this time, then perhaps some trickle of the Chinese emphasis on keeping records and dynastic chronicles may have found its way into the historical traditions of Kashmir.³⁶ Finally, Kalhana obviously believed that history taught lessons

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 8.

²⁸ Ibid, pp. 11.

²⁹ Ibid, pp. 12-14.

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 25.

³¹ Ibid, pp. 22-23.

³² Ibid, pp. 32-33.

³³ Basham, 1961, pp. 62-63.

³⁴ Ibid, pp. 38-39.

³⁵ Thapar, 1983, pp. 53.

³⁶ Ibid, pp. 55.

more practical than mere resignation, by studying the history of earlier reigns. He is inspired by a deep feeling on regional patriotism.³⁷

Themes of '*Rajatarangini*'

To define the nature of Kalhana's '*Rajatarangini*' I would like to highlight some few socio-political and geographical aspects of Kashmir as narrated by Kalhana which will help us to go to conclusion. Kalhana in his '*Rajatarangini*' has described from the origin of Kashmir to his own time. To understand his historical qualities, Kalhana's descriptive qualities can be seen through his analysis of the geographical, social and political systems of Kashmir.

The history of the geography of Kashmir, as pointed out by Kalhan, starts from the age when it was a lake. By refereeing Nilmat Puran he pointed that Kashmir was a lake named Satisar in which Jaldevta lived. Kashyap Rishi and Bhrama Dev with other gods killed Jaldevta and created gardens and mountains, and then Kashmir came into existence. Kashmir was divided into two parts i.e. '*Madawrajya*' & '*Kramrajya*'. Kalhana's knowledge of topography also helped him to write the exact locations of places mentioned in his works. He showed Kashmir not as a small hill station, but a great and mighty land, whose kings in former days conquered the whole of India and even Ceylon.³⁸ For him, Kashmir between 800-1200 CE occupied a distinctive position in Sanskrit cosmologies and was perceived as major cultural center even by outsiders.

In case of society, he talked the castes of Gandhar Pradesh from Yamuna and the boarder of Kashmir. He also pointed out the areas where the particular communities lived. For example he talks about Guhak, Yaksh, Darad who used to live in north of Kashmir region and Gandhar, Khash and Dev were in the south of Kashmir region. He has also talked about the 'Jangali' people. His writings highlights that the people of Kashmir, who credited the foundation of Buddhist Stupas and Viharas, were also attached to Saiv Cults, therefore, they were in touch both with Buddhism and Brahmanism and Buddhist, Brahman and Jain cults were equal to the courts of Kashmir.³⁹ He talks about the cities i.e. Narpur, Puradhistans, & Skandpur his descriptions of famine, food prices, taxation, currency etc. do not fail to give a picture of the economic life of his times.

Kalhan has narrated the politics of Kashmir from early times, but in case of his own time in a great detail. He says that Karkot, Utpal, Lohar, Lohar-II were the main dynasties of ancient Kashmir. His attention on the political affairs of 12th century can be seen as descriptive analysis of Kashmir. As M.A. Stein has written that the commencement of the twelfth century is marked in the history of Kashmir by an important dynastic revolution which brought about material changes in the political state of the country. The Reign of King Harsha (A.D. 1089-1101) seems at first to have secured to Kashmir a period of consolidation and of prosperous peace. But after his death Kashmir was divided into two parts under Uccala and Sussala where Damaras of Kashmir Gargachandra played a diplomatic role in the king-maker.⁴⁰

³⁷ Basham, 1961, pp. 61.

³⁸ Basham, 1961, pp. 61.

³⁹ A chines visitor Hiuen Tsiang has also proved this equality among them (See Stein, 1990, pp. 9).

⁴⁰ Stein, 1900, pp. 15-16.

Conclusion

As it has been seen, whatever I tried to narrate the historical issues to Kalhana's '*Rajatatangini*' in this paper, that the most of scholars and historians are engaged to define this text of Kashmir as the historical one by pointing out its methods of sources, contents and the views on the value of its writings and the nature of a historian. But they define it to be historical only of the later cantons of the '*Rajatatangini*', and defined earlier one to be full of the sources used of myths and legends, not to be historical. To define the whole texts to be historical, I would like to highlight the concept and consciousness of time or ages in the eyes of ancient Indian Hindu people which calibrated the entire spectrum from cosmic to anthropic time in a pattern of four recurring mega-periods (*kṛta*, *tretā*, *dvāpara*, and *kali yugas*) signifying ascent and decline. The *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, composed from circa fifth century BCE to fifth century CE which belong to that genre of Sanskrit literature known as *itihāsa* that is generally understood to stand for "history." As such, the *yugas* may well be regarded as an old and culturally popular choice of mode for rendering time. It can be noted here that Kalhana himself uses the *kaliyuga* as the basis of the dates he ascribes to the early kings of Kashmir. Whatever Kalhana has written in his '*Rajatatangini*' on the basis of the sources what he found, understood by him as the historical sources to make a corrective analysis.

He has used the concept of age (*Kaliyuga*) to give the chronology of the kings of Kashmir on the basis of his sources, yet his arguments are not being accepted by the historians by pointing out Kalhana's "blind faith in Epics and *Puranas*," and of its reliance on "legendary and fictive events."⁴¹ As the historians pointed out earlier cantons were based on the sources which were full of legends and myths, but I asked them by saying that myths also presents the ideas of truths. As wisely observed by Paul Veyne, "myth is not about the real as truth, but about what was noble as truth."⁴²

Thus, Kalahana's epic survey of Kashmir cannot be seen simply as a departure from literary norms of the '*Mahakavyas*', but as an assessment of literature, kingship, reign and dynasties etc. His description of incidents in the recent history appears to achieve a high standard of accuracy, and filled with the use of required sources, which are eminent features of a historian. Thus, after a deep narration of the sources which were used by him, the styles and contents in which he wrote, the themes what he mentioned and his purposes to give a corrective history from the creation of Kashmir to his own time, it can finally be said that he has the historical sense from which he completed the narration of Kashmir: '*Rajatarangini*' which keeps the historical qualities in itself.

⁴¹ Kaul, 2014, pp. 197.

⁴² Ibid, pp. 197.

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